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The Kampuchean Resistance: Still an Uphill Battle

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An Intelligence Assessment

State Dept. review
completed

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EA 82-10094C

September 1982

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The Kampuchean Resistance: Still an Uphill Battle

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An Intelligence Assessment

This assessment was prepared by [redacted]
Indochina, Thailand, and Burma Branch, Office of
East Asian Analysis. Comments and queries are
welcome and may be directed to the Chief, Southeast
Asia Division, OEA, [redacted]

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It was coordinated with the National Intelligence
Council and the Directorate for Intelligence, [redacted]

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Key Judgments

*Information available
as of 15 August 1982
was used in this report.*

The formation of the new Kampuchean coalition government will result in some immediate benefits for the anti-Vietnamese resistance movement:

- The return of the popular Prince Sihanouk to the limelight can only add to the movement's appeal both in Kampuchea and abroad.
- The Communist Democratic Kampuchean (DK) element in particular stands to benefit from an improved domestic and international image.
- The non-Communist Khmer People's National Liberation Front (KPNLF) will at last begin to receive significant financial and military aid.

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The resistance will depend more on the actual military capability and performance of its forces on the ground than on the kind of benefits now flowing from the new political arrangements. And here, the emerging pattern is not particularly encouraging:

- The DK's impressive manpower growth of 1980 and 1981 has been halted.
- The DK suffered some significant military setbacks during the past dry season, and the results so far this rainy season suggest that the Vietnamese are becoming more effective at dealing with the DK's small-unit strategy.
- The non-Communist forces have yet to prove they can use outside support effectively.

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The Vietnamese are now preparing to launch another aggressive dry season campaign this November. If the DK cannot improve on its military performance and solve its serious recruitment problems, the Vietnamese drive to pacify Kampuchea could well develop irreversible momentum.

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The Coalition Agreement: The Benefits . . .

After more than a year of negotiations, the three major Kampuchean resistance factions in June formed the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea.¹ The coalition does not call for the merging of the three groups; each retains its own military force and the right to receive outside aid on an individual basis. Members are "obligated" only to work for Vietnam's withdrawal from Kampuchea and for free elections.

We believe the coalition members will benefit from the association over the near term

Prince Sihanouk's involvement will improve the image of the Communist Democratic Kampuchea resistance forces within Kampuchea and thus may bolster their dismal recruitment outlook. On the international front, the establishment of the coalition will solidify support for the DK seat at the United Nations this fall.

West Germany, Belgium, and the Netherlands probably would have abstained on the seating issue this year had the coalition failed to materialize. ASEAN leaders, moreover, are lobbying to get Sihanouk, as head of the coalition government, invited to address the Nonaligned Movement, a move that would add prestige to the resistance.

Singapore and Malaysia are intent on strengthening the non-Communist forces of Son Sann's Khmer People's National Liberation Front.

they are now beginning to provide long-promised and badly needed military and financial aid, as well as training support to the Front

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¹ The coalition was formed largely at the initiative of Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand to sustain a long-term struggle to persuade Vietnam to accept a compromise regime in Kampuchea that includes Sihanouk and the KPNLF.

The benefits for Sihanouk have been largely personal. He is again in the international limelight; he will represent the coalition government at the UN this fall and will lobby to regain admission of the DK to the Nonaligned Movement. The Prince has proposed merging his forces with those of the KPNLF, a move that would, if implemented, increase his influence on Kampuchean developments.

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. . . And the Weaknesses

The coalition nevertheless could easily come apart. Within the three-man inner cabinet, personal antipathies are intense.

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the DK, for its part, disapproves of Sihanouk's tendency to make unilateral policy statements; it is probably disturbed at Sihanouk's offer of merger with the KPNLF, for example, because such a development would strengthen the KPNLF's appeal inside Kampuchea at the expense of the DK. We believe the DK is also concerned that Sihanouk's popularity among Kampuchean will encourage DK forces to defect. After Sihanouk's mid-July visit to Kampuchean refugee camps along the

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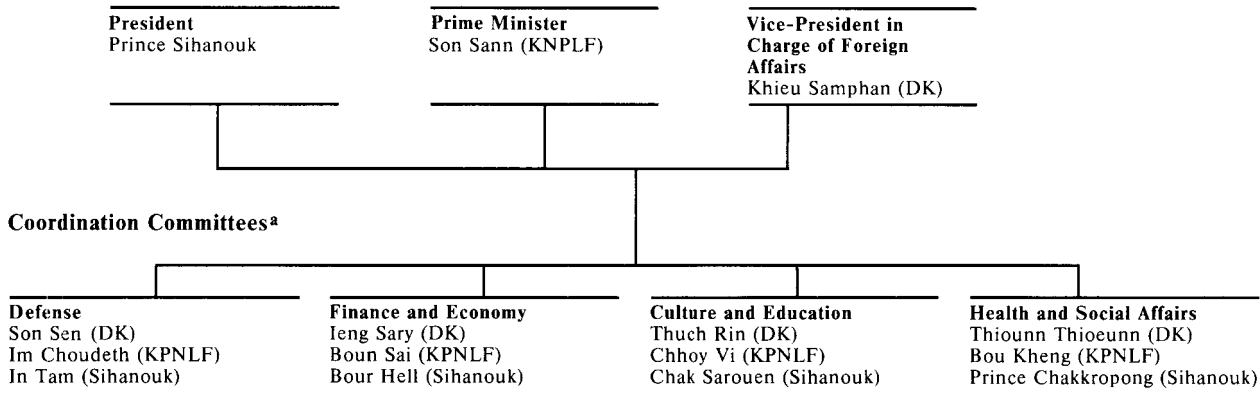
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Figure 1
Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea
Council of Ministers

Inner Cabinet



^a Subordinate to Inner Cabinet (Each chaired by three appointees of Ministerial rank representing the three factions.)

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Thai border, thousands of refugees volunteered to join Sihanouk's resistance group. A continuing flow of refugees to Sihanouk would almost certainly draw criticism—and probably military action—from the DK. [redacted]

Within the four coordinating committees, the non-Communist cochairs, who are relatively unknown midlevel officers, may be overshadowed by the experienced, senior DK appointees. The DK's Economic and Finance Committee cochairman Ieng Sary, for example, is Pol Pot's brother-in-law and was his Foreign Minister before the Vietnamese toppled the Pol Pot regime in 1979. In the Defense Coordinating Committee, DK cochairman Son Sen has extensive guerrilla experience; In Tam—commander in chief of the Sihanoukist forces—and Im Choudeth—Deputy Chief of Staff of the KPNLF—do not. Continuing clashes between the resistance forces and defections from one group to another, moreover, will keep tensions high. Because there so far has been no change in

the conduct of the guerrilla campaign, however, we believe the collapse of the coalition would have no immediate impact on the military situation. [redacted]

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Strains Inside the Resistance Groups

[redacted] each of the groups has internal problems that will have far more serious implications for the future of the military resistance than the strains within the political coalition. The DK, the only resistance group that can field an effective military force, faces dissension within its ranks and worsening recruitment prospects. The KPNLF has a serious shortage of qualified field military commanders. Sihanouk's forces have made almost no contribution to the resistance effort, in part because of mistrust and rivalry among his military commanders. Sihanouk, himself, has provided little direction to his forces. [redacted]

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The DK: Internal Rivalries and Recruitment Problems Regional Differences.

The reemergence of regional animosities among the DK military forces dates back to Pol Pot's brutal purges of the Kampuchean party and military in 1977-78. Aimed at those suspected of collaboration with the Vietnamese and potential opponents to Pol Pot, the purges put cadre from southwestern Kampuchea in charge almost everywhere and decimated the ranks of regular combatants in all other regions.² [redacted] by mid-1978—six months before the Vietnamese invasion—there was serious resentment in several regions of the country against the new senior cadre and mutinies in the north and northwest; a full-scale military rebellion broke out in provinces adjacent to Vietnam. [redacted]

[redacted] southwestern cadre are again in charge of a large number of the DK's military units, while the rank and file are largely composed of local troops. The friction has led to increased desertions, poor morale, and declining effectiveness. [redacted] at least one DK division in northern Kampuchea has had to adopt strict security measures to prevent disaffected troops from defecting. [redacted] a DK division in the same area has had to separate guerrilla units to stem fighting and desertion. [redacted]

Strategy and the Recruitment Problem. The military setbacks suffered by the DK during the past dry season (November 1981–May 1982) and the results of clashes so far this rainy season suggest the DK is having problems with the guerrilla strategy it has used since the Vietnamese invasion. The DK uses highly mobile 10- to 12-man squads to minimize losses while forcing the Vietnamese to withdraw from small, isolated outposts. This strategy was highly effective last year, when the DK was able to expand both its organization and the area under its control. Now that the Vietnamese are using more aggressive tactics, however, the DK gains have been halted. [redacted]

² The rise of cadre from the DK southwestern administrative region is a result of Khmer-Vietnamese ethnic hostility. Academic specialists note that after 1975 the Pol Pot leadership increasingly believed that Hanoi planned to topple it through a coup organized and led by Khmer who had received political and military training in North Vietnam. We believe the southwestern cadre had few connections to Vietnam and therefore were considered by Pol Pot to be reliable. [redacted]

[redacted] Vietnamese outposts and patrols are now larger than DK units. Moreover, the emphasis on mobility requires that the DK squads 25X1 carry minimal amounts of medical equipment. They claim that fear of being wounded coupled with inadequate medical treatment has led to a tendency in some units to avoid military contact. [redacted]

Worsening DK recruitment prospects, however, may prevent the military leadership from increasing the size of its operational units. [redacted] the DK conducted a successful recruitment campaign in areas under its control throughout 1980-81. Many 25X1 recruits were former members of the DK mobile youth brigades and a few were party or Youth League members; overall dedication to the DK regime was high. By late 1981, however, the pool of immediately available youth in the DK-controlled zones was nearly exhausted. [redacted] 25X1 25X1

Recruitment efforts outside of controlled areas have brought fewer and lower quality recruits. [redacted] the DK is still so hated that villagers often report the presence of recruitment teams to the Vietnamese and that those Kampuchians who do sign up are increasingly responsible for poor discipline and desertion. At Phnom Chat, for example, under-strength DK units were [redacted]

[redacted] accepting almost anyone willing to volunteer. Recruits typically were youngsters with no families and refugees who had no access to food supplies. They deserted when they had enough to eat and had obtained money—usually through robbery or extortion of Khmer traders. [redacted] 25X1

Lack of Security for DK Bases and Civilian Supporters. Vietnamese military action has exposed the tenuous security of most DK base camps, and this has been a major factor in the DK's poor recruitment effort. [redacted] 25X1

- A Vietnamese strike at a regional headquarters in northern Kampuchea destroyed supplies, crops, and essential housing. The DK population was forced temporarily to abandon the site. [redacted] 25X1

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- Near Phnom Melai the Vietnamese drove the DK from staging bases, seized training facilities, overran some headquarters complexes, and temporarily forced thousands of DK civilian supporters into Thailand.

Even a small increase in the numbers of troops would cause per capita food availability to decline considerably. [redacted] 25X1

- In the far south, Vietnamese forces prevented the guerrillas from establishing new bases. [redacted]

[redacted] while knowledge of the existence of the Front is spreading, many Khmer peasants still know little about the Front's program or its leadership. A planned increase in radiobroadcasts will help resolve this problem, but will not guarantee the Front a greater appeal. [redacted] 25X1

Even if the DK could prevent such attacks, the DK-controlled zones offer little economic security because of an almost total lack of land suitable for food crop production. [redacted] for some units, chronic food shortages are directly responsible for desertion [redacted]

[redacted] KPNLF proselytizers have alienated peasants by consulting only with village leaders. [redacted] 25X1

[redacted] Front representatives appear to care less about them than do the Vietnamese-puppet authorities of the Heng Samrin regime in Phnom Penh. Even if the KPNLF were able to recruit large numbers of troops, we doubt it has the capability to move them safely from the interior to the base camps in the border area. For example, there is little evidence that the KPNLF has secure routes between the interior and the border that could be used to exfiltrate groups of recruits. [redacted] 25X1

If unsolved, we believe these problems will lead to a sharp decline in the DK's effectiveness over the next several years. The US Embassy in Bangkok believes that the less than 100,000 people estimated to remain under DK control might produce 1,000 15- and 16-year-olds for the guerrilla forces annually. The Embassy also estimates that DK casualties from the fighting during the past dry season were at least 2,500, and we expect the Vietnamese to launch another aggressive military campaign this winter.

[redacted] even if food supplies increased, facilities at most of the KPNLF base camps could not support a sudden influx of new troops. [redacted] 25X1

Setbacks for the Non-Communist Forces

Son Sann's KPNLF. The KPNLF's problems over the past six months have hinged on two factors—recruitment and leadership. KPNLF claims that it could quickly field an additional 3,000 to 4,500 troops if it were provided adequate weapons are probably valid. But the KPNLF's poor performance during this past dry season suggests that fielding a large effective force will be difficult. In March, the Vietnamese easily overran the Front's most effective guerrilla base, and thousands of civilian supporters were forced into Thailand. Although the Vietnamese attack was facilitated by a KPNLF decision to abandon their positions rather than suffer heavy casualties, the US Embassy in Bangkok believes this action has probably discouraged potential recruits who fear the KPNLF will be unable to stand up either to the DK or the Vietnamese. Inadequate food supplies will also keep the KPNLF from greatly expanding their forces. International food aid is intended only for noncombatants, who now share their rations with the troops.

The KPNLF has not been successful in recruiting enough qualified military commanders. Few of the senior KPNLF officers have an understanding of guerrilla tactics; the performance of the two most senior KPNLF military men—Generals Dien Del and Sak Sutsakhan—have been described [redacted] 25X1

[redacted] as disappointing. [redacted] the poor performance of Dien Del is causing dissension among other senior KPNLF leaders. The problem is compounded by Son Sann, who is reluctant to make military-related decisions. Nor do we believe the arrival of General Thach Reng, a respected former commander of Kampuchean special forces, will have an immediate impact on the KPNLF; he has been out of the country for several years and does not have a full appreciation of the Front's situation. [redacted] 25X1

Sihanouk's Moulinaka. Despite its current popularity, Sihanouk's military forces—less than 1,000 troops—are unlikely soon to offer any real resistance

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Prince Sihanouk visiting Kampuchean refugees at a Thai refugee holding center.

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to the Vietnamese.

only 30 percent of a recent large group of volunteers are potential combatants for Moulinaka forces and that many will quickly become unhappy with the inadequate food, shelter, and medical facilities available at Sihanoukuri (formerly O'Smach), a major Sihanoukist base. Resistance activities there are limited by the heavy use of landmines by the Vietnamese and steady pressure by Vietnamese patrols.

Turning Point for the Resistance?

Despite the problems and adverse trends noted above, we doubt that Hanoi will be able to eliminate the anti-Vietnamese resistance over the next few years. The resistance forces were able to survive the increased

level of Vietnamese military activity during the past dry season.

the DK has been carrying out operations in the interior Provinces of Takev, Prey Veng, and Kampot.

But it is difficult to escape the impression that the resistance is nearing an ominous turning point. The impressive growth of the DK in 1980-81 has been halted. The non-Communist forces, if they are to continue to receive financial and material support

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from Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand, will have to prove they can field new recruits and provide them with food. []

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The Vietnamese are preparing to launch another aggressive dry season campaign in November. At about the same time, we expect another food shortage to push large numbers of refugees to the border. [] If the DK cannot improve on its military performance and if it cannot take advantage of the recruitment opportunities offered by the influx of refugees, the Vietnamese drive to pacify Kampuchea could, in our view, develop irreversible momentum. []

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